

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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R 230920Z JUN 77
FM AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8246

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 VIENTIANE 0955

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PROP SEEL MOPS LA US
SUBJECT: EXPLOSIVE ORDNANCE DISPOSAL IN LAOS

REF: A VIENTIANE 0652 PARAGRAPH 6D, B REPORT OF PRESI-
DENTIAL COMMISSION'S TRIP TO VIETNAM AND LAOS, MARCH 1977.

1. REPORT OF PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION'S TRIP TO VIET-
NAM AND LAOS, MARCH 16-20, 1977, NOTED "THE COMMISSION
BELIEVES THE U.S. COULD PROVIDE ADVICE AND TECHNICAL
ASSISTANCE ON HOW TO DEFUSE SUCH ORDNANCE (UNEXPLODED
ORDNANCE IN LAOS) AND THAT THE AMERICAN PEOPLE WOULD
UNDERSTAND AND SUPPORT SUCH AN EFFORT. SHOULD THE LEGAL
AND TECHNICAL EXPERTS IN WASHINGTON DETERMINE THAT AN
OFFER OF SUCH ASSISTANCE IS FEASIBLE WE SUGGEST
CONSIDERATION OF THE FOLLOWING BROAD APPROACH TO IT.

2. MOST OF THE COMMENTS WE HAVE HEARD FROM LAO ABOUT
THE PROBLEM OF UNEXPLODED ORDNANCE CONCERN ACCIDENTS
RESULTING WHEN BOMBS BURIED IN THE GROUND, PARTICULARLY
ON THE PLAIN OF JARS, ARE EXPLODED BY FARMERS WORKING
THE GROUND WITH HOES. SOME OF OUR LAO INFORMANTS HAVE
SUGGESTED THAT TRACTOR DRAWN PLOWS WHICH COULD DIG
DEEP ENOUGH TO TURN UP THE SOIL GENTLY, EXPOSING
BURIED BOMBS FOR COLLECTION AND DISPOSAL, COULD REDUCE
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DANGER OF ACCIDENTS. WE ARE NOT SURE WHETHER THIS
SPECIFIC PROPOSAL IS A PRACTICAL ONE FROM THE TECHNI-
CAL POINT OF VIEW, BUT BELIEVE THE GENERAL IDEA MIGHT
USEFULLY BE EXAMINED.

3. WE HAVE THE IMPRESSION THAT A LARGE AMOUNT OF UN-
EXPLODED ORDNANCE REMAINS OVER A WIDE AREA OF LAOS.

WE ASSUME THAT ANY EFFORT TO COMB OVER THE ENTIRE AREA IN WHICH ORDNANCE WAS EXPENDED WOULD BE PROHIBITIVELY EXPENSIVE AND INTERMINABLE. AN ORDNANCE DISPOSAL EFFORT BY AMERICAN PERSONNEL WORKING ON THE GROUND IN LAOS SEEMS IMPRACTICABLE FOR TWO REASONS: A) THE LAO, EXTREMELY SUSPICIOUS OF THE UNITED STATES AND PARTICULARLY OF THE UNITED STATES MILITARY, WOULD BE UNLIKELY TO AGREE TO ANY SUCH AMERICAN MILITARY PRESENCE, AND B) IN THE UNLIKELY EVENT THE LAO DID AGREE, CASUALTIES AMONG AMERICAN PERSONNEL SO OPERATING WOULD BE INEVITABLE.

4. IT MIGHT BE DESIRABLE TO APPROACH THIS EXPLOSIVE ORDNANCE DISPOSAL PROBLEM ON AN EXPERIMENTAL BASIS AND IN A MANAGEABLE FORMAT BY: A) DELIMITING A SPECIFIC GEOGRAPHIC AREA, PROBABLY IN THE PLAIN OF JARS; B) OFFERING TRAINING AND EQUIPMENT TO LAO MILITARY AND/OR OTHER GOVERNMENT PERSONNEL; C) RECOMMENDING A TRIAL PERIOD OF OPERATIONS DURING WHICH THE SELECTED LAO PERSONNEL USING AMERICAN EQUIPMENT AND TRAINING WOULD CONDUCT ORDNANCE DISPOSAL OPERATIONS; D) CONSIDERING UPON THE CONCLUSION OF THIS SPECIFIC LIMITED AREA OPERATION THE PURSUIT OF A SIMILAR OPERATION IN ANOTHER SELECTED AREA, MODIFYING IT ACCORDING TO THE LESSONS LEARNED DURING THE INITIAL OPERATION.

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5. THE RATIONALE FOR THE AMERICAN CONTRIBUTION WOULD, FROM OUR POINT OF VIEW, BE THE PROVISION OF HUMANITARIAN AID IN THE CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL U.S. HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE RATHER THAN IN THE CONTEXT OF "REPARATIONS" OR OF A QUID PRO QUO FOR MIA INFORMATION.

6. TO MEET THE PROBLEMS OF SECURITY REGARDING ADVANCED ORDNANCE AND THE LACK OF TECHNICAL SKILLS AMONG LAO PERSONNEL, IT MIGHT BE USEFUL TO PLAN IN TERMS OF LOCATION OF UNEXPLODED ORDNANCE AND ITS DESTRUCTION ON THE SPOT BY APPROPRIATE TECHNIQUES (PLASTIC DEMOLITION CHARGES, ETC.) RATHER THAN IN TERMS OF ANY COMPLICATED DEFUSING OR DISARMING OPERATION.

7. FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF U.S. BILATERAL RELATIONS WITH LAOS AND GIVEN THE APPARENT UNLIKELIHOOD OF ANY ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE, AS SUCH, TO LAOS UNDER EXISTING LEGISLATION, AN EXPLOSIVE ORDNANCE DISPOSAL EFFORT MIGHT SERVE TO STAVE OFF DISINTEGRATION OF US/LAO DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS PENDING BROADER DEVELOPMENTS WHICH MIGHT EFFECT A GENERAL IMPROVEMENT IN RELATIONS.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 VIENTIANE 0955

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8. THE INAUGURATION OF SUCH A HUMANITARIAN EFFORT WOULD PROBABLY MAKE IT EASIER FOR US TO PRESS FOR MORE MIA INFORMATION FROM THE LAO, ALTHOUGH WE SHOULD BE CAREFUL TO AVOID ANY "BARGAINING" APPROACH ON THIS SUBJECT: WHICH WOULD SIMPLY ENCOURAGE THE LAO TO HOLD OFF ON WHATEVER INFORMATION THEY MIGHT HAVE OR ACQUIRE IN THE HOPE OF EXTRACTING MORE AND MORE ASSISTANCE.

9. OUR SUGGESTION IS THAT WE ADDRESS EXPLOSIVE ORDNANCE DISPOSAL ON AN EXPERIMENTAL BASIS LIMITED TO A PRECISE AREA IN LAOS, A COUNTRY WITH WHICH OUR DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS HAVE NOT BEEN INTERRUPTED AND WHERE OFFICIALS SPECIFICALLY RAISED THE QUESTION WITH THE PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION. BY FOLLOWING THIS APPROACH WE MIGHT BE ABLE SIMULTANEOUSLY:

- A) TO PERFORM A HUMANITARIAN ACT JUSTIFIABLE ON ITS OWN MERITS,
- B) TO MAKE AN EFFORT IN THE DIRECTION OF IMPROVED LAO/US RELATIONS, AND
- C) TO DETERMINE WHETHER OR NOT IT WOULD BE PRACTICABLE TO CONSIDER BROADER UNDERTAKINGS OF THIS SORT IN LAOS OR IN VIETNAM IN THE FUTURE.

10. ACTION REQUESTED: DEPARTMENT'S VIEWS.
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